

AKTUELL

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What consumers have to want

Freedom of choice à la Greenpeace has to do neither with choice nor with liberty, say Peter Langelüddeke and Thomas Deichmann.

In the middle of April, new EU labelling regulations came into force for food and fodder derived from transgenic sources. As one might expect, they immediately opened a new field of operations for organizations such as Greenpeace, which have no sympathy for green genetic engineering. They pressurise enterprises in the food chain to dissociate themselves from applications of the modern life sciences. If in the past any of those companies yielded so much as an inch to Greenpeace and promised publicly to take Greenpeace's "consumer's concerns" seriously by removing GM food from their shelves, the Greenpeace screws are tightened further. Now the entire food chain is under attack: not only must there be no genetically modified food but neither any products derived from animals fed GM fodder – as, for example, milk, meat or cheese from cows whose feed contained soybean meal, corn or other protein-rich additives of transgenic origin. Since there are no special risks known for these practices, Greenpeace can supply no actual arguments for the goods boycott and tries instead to attack the retailers where they are most vulnerable: the acceptance of their consumers. The weapon of choice is the defamatory threat.

Genetically modified food has had to be labelled in the European Union since 1997/98. From the outset, Greenpeace saw in those rules a chance to set themselves up as alleged consumer protection organization and so to gain membership. One of its first victims was Nestlé with its chocolate bar "butter finger", which was offered in Germany in September 1998. The product contained components from GM corn and therefore had to be labelled, thus pandering to food conservatives who want to avoid technological development. In a large-scale campaign the butter finger was damned by Greenpeace as a dangerous product of the devil. Sales anyway were poor so Nestlé climbed down and, in the summer 1999, took the product off the market.

By the late summer 1998 a large-scale campaign against "gene food" had started. Greenpeace required a declaration from the food retailers that they avoid all GM raw materials, at least in their own brands. The enterprises were at first reluctant and were indignant at allegations by Greenpeace that they were ignoring "consumer's concerns" – at a time, when hardly anyone was interested in the topic. Moreover, sales did not drop if the attempts at intimidation by Greenpeace were resisted. But the environment organization did not relent; moreover, the Greens became a part of the Federal Government. With their forces now united, the notion that Green genetic engineering is dangerous was strengthened. Finally, in the summer 1999, the companies began to yield to the pressure of the PR professionals – first Tengelmann, then Rewe, Edeka, Spar, Lidl and finally Aldi. Still later, specific actions against McDonald's and the KaDeWe in Berlin followed. In December 2003 Metro also gave way and met the demand of the anti-biotech lobbyists to offer no more

transgenic food.

With these and further campaigns, one thing became clear above all else: Greenpeace always calls for the rejection of genetic engineering through the consumers. In fact, freedom of choice is not the issue as the aim is to deprive consumers of any opportunity to decide for themselves for or against GM products. "Freedom of choice", according to Greenpeace, is between "genetic engineering-free" and "without genetic engineering".

The situation within the European Union changed when, in the autumn 2003, two regulations were adopted for labelling (1) and traceability (2). As from the middle of April 2004, food which manufactured from GM raw materials must be labelled even when no trace of such GM materials can be detected analytically in the final product. Greenpeace and other organizations welcomed that and insisted that animal feeds were also to be labelled. But they criticized the fact that, among the existing absurd labelling regulations, one was missing: foods such as meat, milk, or eggs from animals fed with transgenic plants did not have to be labelled.

Greenpeace recognized this gap and immediately realigned its anti-GM campaign: "80 per cent of the pigs in Germany still eat GM fodder" they claimed at the beginning of January 2004. "Gene detectives" were asked to "be on the look-out for labelled products in the supermarkets and find out who the manufacturer and the dealers were. Then we can see exactly against which products to proceed." (3).

They wanted once more to pillory food manufacturers and retailers offering properly labelled products. At the beginning of April, Greenpeace announced: "Together with consumers, Greenpeace will seek out and highlight GM food" (4). Some days later, the first "Auxiliary Sheriffs" duly appeared in supermarkets in order to check whether everything was above board (5). Anyone who wanted to take part in this action was asked to fill out a "gene protocol" and to pass this to Greenpeace under the slogan "Sound a gene alarm!". In the middle of May the campaign adopted the slogan "consumers warn consumers" (6). So, in a well-proven fashion, the erroneous impression was promoted that the consumption of food which, at any stage of its production, had been in contact with genetic engineering was a hazard for persons, animals and the environment.

For the "Guide to enjoy genetic engineering-free shopping", which Greenpeace published on the occasion of the German agricultural fair "Green Week" in 2004, the GM investigators classified more than 400 companies as green, yellow or red (7), based on the answers given to a Greenpeace questionnaire. Enterprises which had not offered the desired declarations – i.e. those that had not taken part in the inquiry or had not categorically distanced themselves from genetic engineering – were accordingly placed on the red list as "not recommended". During the following weeks, this "shopping guide" was massively publicised and, by the end of June, was in its fourth edition. In the middle of May, Greenpeace presented the millionth copy to the Prime Minister of Saxonia-Anhalt (8). The guide states: "Consumers have the choice." The true message, however, is: "We must not leave choice to the consumer." On this point one commentator in the German weekly magazine "Die Zeit" wrote: "Greenpeace knows what customers have to want" (9).

Naturally, industry watchers were not in the least surprised by the new campaign against GM animal fodder. Greenpeace had already protested for years against feeds with or from

transgenic raw materials without being able to specify the dangers allegedly resulting from it. The industry had become almost used to slogans and messages like "genetic engineering: soon to be in your glass of milk thanks to Novartis "(10)," animal fodder in 'Green Week ' contains GM soya" (11) and "genetic engineering in the trough: pig and chicken fodder experimented with" (12). Moreover, nobody really expected that the barrage would end because, from their point of view, the Greenpeace anxiety campaign was rather successful: the fact that scientific data proved that food products from animals ingesting transgenes from their fodder presented no special risks – and differed in no way from conventionally fed counterparts – were swept assiduously under the carpet (13).

So it was only a question of the time before Greenpeace sought to provoke a furore with its next "Gensation". It came on April 22nd when they announced: "sabotage in gene labelling" (14). The trigger was a statement from a Hamburg import firm who explained that their goods would be labelled "gene soya" although a given batch might contain no "gene plants". The firm argued that it is well-known among fodder dealers that a high portion of the world's soya supply is based on transgenic plants, and that a separation of conventional and transgenic types in the course of the marketing is not only spurious, but also very expensive and therefore hardly ever carried out. Moreover, heavy penalties are threatened if unlabelled transgenic goods are marketed within the European Union and, in particular, in Germany. Some trading ventures therefore hedge their bets by labelling all their soya as "made by genetic engineering".

Greenpeace did not like that at all. This procedure was held to offend against EU law and, they argued, through possibly incorrect labelling farmers "were forced" by feed companies to buy a product defined as "GM fodder". The feed industry took the view that, as GM seeds were used in most soya cultivation areas, the risk of falsely defining their soya as GM-free was too great (15). Consumer Protection Minister Künast sang from the same hymn sheet as Greenpeace and explained that a wrong declaration offended against valid laws. The concerns of the suppliers is to save the cost of controls which are scientifically senseless. Yet they accept the fact that they have to offer their goods at a lower price because of the GM label.

Soon the next coup occurred to the PR strategists in Hamburg. The "red list" included the companies Saxonia Milk and Weihenstephan – both used the additive "Müller Milk". That fitted nicely, as Müller Milk had already been widely criticised in the country because, for financial reasons, they had considered moving the company headquarters to Switzerland. Greenpeace could thus count on the existing reservations of some consumers and asked at the end of April: "How much genetic engineering is there in Müller milk?" The official company sources were disputed and Greenpeace demanded sight of the contracts proving that happy Müller Milk cattle indeed had not been supplied with GM fodder (16). According to Greenpeace, Müller Milk had offered to do everything in their power to exclude "gene plants" from the fodder of the milk cows. Yet the Greenpeace-test brigades had discovered a "considerable share of transgenic soya bean" on the Müller-Milk-farms. "The milk giant would consequently have to sign contracts with the milk farmers which guaranteed the use of fodder without GM soya and maize, and which also guaranteed fair prices. Müller would also need to provide sufficient monitoring. If these obligatory steps were not carried out, the consumer could expect nothing except a lot of hot air and gene milk from Müller", explained the arrogant Christoph Then, one of the numerous so-called "genetic engineering experts" from Greenpeace.

We can now summarize the last "scandal": Self-appointed inspectors of a private club, with no public function and no democratic mandate (but claiming that they are "the voice of the people"), dress themselves up as controllers and visit strange farms in order to regulate not only consumers, but also farmers and firms, telling them what they may and may not do. Their primary interest is in promoting their own activities based upon the inability of farmers and citizens to fight against their self-inflicted evil. And in this lively fashion the campaign proceeded further. "Rice pudding without GM milk simply tastes better" came out on 3 May (17). On that day, in Munich's Marienplatz, Greenpeace together with top-ranking cooks demonstrated how good rice pudding tastes when made with the milk of cows not fed GM fodder. No taste comparison was offered because even the most junior Greenpeace local campaigner naturally knows that there are no taste differences between rice pudding made with or without GM fodder. Few days later a "moo mobile" was placed in front of the Saxonia Milk factory in Leppersdorf (18). This vehicle is obviously intended to provide headlines in the coming slack summer period. Parallel to that are other activities: like-minded persons may raise their voice against "gene milk" via a hotline, while activists are equipped with warning stickers "gene milk - hands off!", ready to be plastered on Müller products in supermarkets (19).

Before long, and for the first time, the courts began to concern themselves with Greenpeace activities – on 26 May at the regional court in Cologne, Müller Milk sought a provisional injunction against business-damaging activities (20). As expected, on 13 June Greenpeace rejected an agreement suggested by the court and instead started a campaign against the Müller label Weihenstephan and their product designation "alpine milk" – a skilful tactical manoeuvre to stay in the headlines (21). In an internal circular on 14 June, the responsible regional Greenpeace campaign leaders were informed that the Greenpeace headquarters assumed at the end of June the regional court would announce that Müller milk had right on its side in most respects. And so it turned out: on 23 June the Cologne court imposed a provisional order against Greenpeace in which it was forbidden to continue with its defamation campaign against Müller milk or use the term "gene milk" with regard to the products of the group, or that Müller products contain "genetic engineering". "Undisputed scientific knowledge shows that the employment of GM feed does not lead to changes of the milk", said the judge. Greenpeace has made factual statements that are "evidently wrong". An offence against the order would result in a fine of €250,000 or detention for up to six months. With such a judgement expected, on 14 June the activists received exact instructions via an internal circular under the slogan "Let's Rock Them Hard!" in the days to come and "Let's get on Müller's nerves"; after all: "We still we have 12 days". Hence the call went out: "We can use still all our campaign tools until 23 June. Everything must be used." In order to avoid driving up Müller Milk's claims for compensation still further, they were told not to label any more Müller products in the supermarkets (22).

Similar ridiculous kindergarten capers against genetic engineering are also perpetrated abroad. On 22 April, Greenpeace supervisors in the port of Rio Grande in the south of Brazil "examined" a freighter, and demanded information and vouchers about the origin of the feed it was carrying. When the captain refused, the ship was defined as "genetically manipulated" (23). Six days later Greenpeace detectives boarded a cargo ship approaching Malaga, climbed on derricks and masts, and unfolded a banner against the "contamination of Spanish food" (24). On 10 May, leisure activists from the Greenpeace Adventure Club in the port of Ravenna surrounded a depot after they had discovered "GM soya" there (25).

Simultaneously, the loading of an Argentine freighter, which was to put to sea with a cargo of transgenic, was obstructed in the port of Chioggia, (26). And in the port of Brake on the river Weser, "ecoadventurers" in nine inflatable dinghies tried to prevent a freighter loaded with "genetic soy meal" from mooring (27). About 60 police officers with helicopters and patrol boats were used, the dinghies were seized and 22 activists temporarily arrested. Criminal proceedings are now expected for a threat to navigation (28). With two dinghies destroyed, the best that Greenpeace headquarters could come up with was: "just as action was taken here against our inflatables, so will action also be taken against the consumer."

And so it goes on. Greenpeace will certainly continue the flourishing business of provoking anxiety – at least as long as the false impression can be promulgated on the fringes of society that fighting against Green genetic engineering is honourable and conducted in the service of humanity.

Political decision-makers should know that that is a fallacy and act accordingly. Karl-Heinz Paqué, the Finance Minister of Sachsen-Anhalt, said that he wanted to find a political and legal means of denying Greenpeace its charitable status (29). It is high time that someone did so; a Canadian court has already taken such action (30). Food producers and the trade generally should reflect on the whole kerfuffle surrounding Green genetic engineering and how Greenpeace's little games pretend to focus on the concerns of consumers. But today, fortunately, as they wander up and down the supermarket aisles, hardly anyone worries seriously concerns about his own health. The Greenpeace affair flourishes for the moment mainly from the fear of the food industry of becoming victims of campaigns. In order to avoid that, the industry should forge ahead, free from Greenpeace dictates and attentive to the needs of its own businesses. Sooner or later that course will pay for itself because otherwise they lay themselves open to attacks driven by all manner of irrationalisms. It is their own fault, one is inclined to say, if they let themselves be dominated for years by a self-appointed gene police instead of pulling themselves together with a jerk and putting a proper selection of GM products onto the shelves.

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To the topic GREENPEACE worth reading

Die Welt, 24.6.04: <http://www.welt.de/data/2004/06/24/295768.html>

All about Müller. Otherwise nothing

Yesterday a court decided that Greenpeace may no longer denigrate Müller milk over the use of genetic engineering. It is not the first defeat of the environmentalists; there are loud calls to deny it charitable status.

Die Welt, 26.6.04:

<http://www.welt.de/data/2004/06/28/297632.html?search=Greenpeace&searchHILI=1>

On strange fields

Only since the aggressive campaign against Müller milk do politicians not demand that Greenpeace's charitable status is denied - a discussion with the genetic engineering expert

of the environmentalists

Novo magazine, Nr.60: <http://www.novo-magazin.de/60/novo6034.htm>

China versus Greenpeace

Pia Rufener aluminium Mazyad and Klaus Ammann over a campaign of the alleged nature protectors.

Novo magazine, NR. 46: <http://www.novo-magazin.de/46/novo4640.htm>

"Greenpeace said good-bye to logic and science"

Michael Miersch in the discussion with the joint founder and critic of Greenpeace, Patrick Moore.

Magazine for bio politics, Nr.1, 3.Jg. 2004: http://www.biocom.de/zfb/zfb_ausgabe.htm

Peter Langelueddeke: Greenpeace: Tactics in the fight against the green genetic engineering

Die Welt, 5.7.2004: <http://www.welt.de/data/2004/07/05/301021.html?s=1>

Greenpeace threatened by the loss of charitable status. Saxonia-Anhalt examines appropriate steps

Footnotes

- 1) regulation (EEC) NR. 1829/2003 on genetically modified food and feeds.
- 2) regulation (EEC) NR. 1830/2003 over traceability and labelling.
- 3) Greenpeace: News to Greenpeace and environmental topics. Purchasing network: "consumers join in", 2.1.04.
- 4) Greenpeace press statement: "Greenpeace and gene detectives control food", 2.4.04.
- 5) Greenpeace: News to Greenpeace and environmental topics. Purchasing network: "Sherlock Holmes in the supermarket", 16.4.04.
- 6) Greenpeace: "Gene protocoll"; Greenpeace Purchasing network: "I became a gene detective", 12.5.04.
- 7) Greenpeace: "Food without genetic engineering. Purchasing advice for genetic engineering-free participation ", 2004.
- 8) Greenpeace press portal: "Greenpeace presents the millionth purchasing advice ' food without genetic engineering '", 12.5.04.
- 9) " Knocked into second place. Greenpeace knows what customers ought to want ", Die Zeit, NR. 17/2004.
- 10) Greenpeace: "Genetic engineering: also soon in your glass of milk thanks to Novartis", 6.10.98.
- 11) Greenpeace press statement: "Greenpeace: animal fodder in the ' Greens week ' contains GM soya. BSE, antibiotics... Gene soya – the feed industry has not learned anything", 18.1.02.
- 12) Greenpeace: "Genetic engineering in the trough as pig and chicken fodder is experimented with", 8/03.
- 13) Flachowsky, G./Aulrich, K.: "Animal nutrition and genetically changed organisms", Landbauforschung Völkenrode, Heft 1/1999, S.13-20; Flachowsky, G./Aulrich, K.: "Nutritional assessment of feeds from genetically modified organisms", Journal of Animal and Feed Sciences, 10, Suppl.1, 2001, S.181-194.
- 14) Greenpeace News to Greenpeace and environmental topics. Genetic engineering:

"Sabotage in gene labelling ", 22.4.04.

15) Deutschlandfunk - environment and agriculture: "Opaque food", 23.4.04.

16) Greenpeace press statement: "How much genetic engineering is there in Müller Milk? Greenpeace doubts company information and demands clear contracts ", 30.4.04.

17) Greenpeace press statement: "Spit roasting and Greenpeace cook together against genetic engineering. Greenpeace discovers GM soya with milk farmers of Müller ", 3.5.04.

18) Greenpeace News to Greenpeace and environmental topics. Genetic engineering: "Join in: moos against Müller Milk ", 10.5.04.

19) press portal: "Greenpeace countryside labels GM milk on the fridge shelves/Müller Milk does not want to give up GM fodder for cows", 17.5.04.

20) "Request for issuing a provisional order by the entrepreneurial group Theo Mueller GmbH and CO KG", 26.5.04 (published on www.greenpeace.org).

21) "GM plants for 'alpine milk '", Greenpeace press release, 8.6.04.

22) "Müller activities", Greenpeace Rundmail, 14.6.04.

23) Greenpeace: News to Greenpeace and environmental topics. Genetic engineering: "Brazil: Better without GM seed ", 22.4.04.

24) Greenpeace: News to Greenpeace and environmental topics. Genetic engineering: "From winner to loser", 28.4.04.

25) Greenpeace: News to Greenpeace and environmental topics. Genetic engineering: "GM soya depot surrounded", 10.5.04.

26) Greenpeace: News to Greenpeace and environmental topics. Genetic engineering: "Protest against GM soya 15 metres high", 13.5.04.

27) Greenpeace press statement with updates: "GM soya freighters not wanted"; Actualization: "GM soya freighter endangers environmentalists", 13.5.04.

28) Yahoo! News: "Protest against GM soya - 22 Greenpeace Activists arrested", 13.5.04.

29) "Difficult times for Greenpeace. After sabotage of the genetic investigation, deprivation of charitable status is threatened ", Stuttgarter Nachrichten, 5.5.04.

30) "Greenpeace has said good-bye to logic and science", interview with the joint founder of Greenpeace, Patrick Moore, Novo46, 5-6 2000 (S.A. www.novo-magazin.de/46/novo4640.htm)

Weblinks

www.transgen.de

www.biosicherheit.de

www.erprobungsanbau.de

www.gentechnik_kennzeichnung.de

www.muellergroup.com

www.greenpeace.de